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## **Researching Non-Heterosexual Sexualities**

### **Visualising experience: Using creative research methods with members of sexual and gender communities**

Meg Barker, Christina Richards and Helen Bowes-Catton

#### **Introduction**

This chapter argues that visual methods may be particularly appropriate for the study of non-heteronormative sexualities and genders, particularly the more marginal identities and practices which have tended to be pathologised in, and excluded from, past research. We focus here on three of these: bisexuality (attraction to more than one gender, or regardless of gender), trans (moving away from the gender which was assigned at birth), and polyamory (having multiple sexual and/or intimate relationships). Of course trans people may be heterosexual, or indeed of any sexuality, but have tended to be marginalised in many of the same ways as people from non-heterosexual sexualities, and are consequently included in this chapter for that reason. First we briefly overview the history of qualitative research on non-heterosexual sexualities and trans, arguing that qualitative methods, per se, do not prevent researchers from forming limiting understandings and problematic generalisations about such groups. Then we present an alternative to conventional interview/focus group discussion research involving the use of visual methods. We summarise key reasons why this may be particularly appropriate to the exploration of those in marginalised sexualities, genders and relationship forms, and then present three examples, based in our own research, of the ways in which such research provided data which confounded simple celebratory or critical conclusions about people in these communities. Finally, we summarise some methodological considerations which are of value to those considering the use of visual methods in their own research.

Shifts from quantitative to qualitative research methods have generally been embraced in the field of non-heterosexual sexualities and trans. One reason for this is that quantitative methods have historically been associated with mainstream positivism and empiricism (Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010) whose attempts to categorise and explain sexualities and gender have frequently resulted in exclusion and pathologisation of those outside of heteronormativity. For example, bisexuality has often been rendered invisible by the use of dichotomous categories of sexual orientation (Barker & Langdridge, 2008), and mainstream psychological coverage of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) sexualities overwhelmingly seeks biological correlates to explain difference from an assumed heterosexual norm (Barker, 2007). Of course there are many notable exceptions to this: quantitative studies which take an explicitly critical stance to understandings of sexuality (e.g. Hegarty, 2002) and/or which utilise

quantitative methods to add empirical clout to LGBT causes in a world where statistics still hold a lot of weight (e.g. Rivers, 2001).

However, generally speaking, qualitative methods have been welcomed as a preferable alternative to quantitative approaches. This is because they tend to be rooted in more critical philosophies (e.g. phenomenology, social constructionism, social interactionism) which allow for more complex and diverse understandings of sexuality. There is also an emphasis on representing the voices, experiences and meanings of the participants themselves (Silverman, 2004), which is intended to limit any further marginalisation and stigmatisation of already marginalised and stigmatised groups. Most commonly, such qualitative research takes the form of interviews and/or focus group discussions with the non-heterosexual or trans group or community of interest. The recorded data is transformed into written transcripts which are analysed using an experiential approach such as grounded theory or interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA); or a critical approach such as discourse or narrative analysis (Clarke et al., 2010).

Unfortunately, though, using a qualitative approach in itself does not inoculate the researcher against the problems which have been highlighted above in relation to quantitative research. This is particularly apparent when one examines qualitative research on the more marginalised of the non-heteronormative identities and practices: those which come at the end of the LGBT etc. acronym, or which do not even make it onto the list. In this paper we focus on three of these: bisexuality, trans, and polyamory, but one might also consider research on sadomasochism (or kink) and asexuality, amongst others.

We have noticed, in the qualitative literature on all three of our areas of focus, a polarisation: Research tends to be either celebratory or critical (Barker & Langdridge, 2010). Celebratory research hails the queer, feminist, or otherwise radical potentials of the identity or practice in question. Critical research highlights its normativity, often arguing that the identity or practice is regarded as radical or liberating by those who adhere to it, but that, in reality, it fails to live up to such claims. We will provide specific examples of such polarisation when we explore each area separately, later in the paper. What we are arguing overall is that both celebratory and critical forms of qualitative research can be just as problematic as the forms of quantitative research which they aim to distance themselves from. They tend to assume that all forms of an identity or practice are equivalent; generalisations are made – often on the basis of very small numbers of participants; and the quantitative trap of seeking one unifying explanation or understanding, is frequently fallen into, despite researchers paying lip service to reflexivity, ethics of participant care, participatory research, and so on.

Of course, as with quantitative research, the method alone does not condemn the researcher to making limiting, or problematic, claims. There are many examples of qualitative studies in these areas which draw on interview or focus group discussion data, and which refuse simplistic and singular understandings in favour of complexity and multiplicity. Examples would be Klesse's (2006, 2007) work on bisexuality and non-monogamy, or Bauer's (2007, 2010) research on trans and sadomasochism; both of which make a point of representing the range of participant discourses and experiences, and articulate the tensions and contradictions as well as the consistencies and similarities within them. This is reflected, for example, in Klesse's conclusion that polyamory is 'positioned ambiguously in the conjuncture of diverse normative and counter-normative discourses on sex and relationships' (2007, p.579).

However, we found ourselves wondering whether there might be a methodological component to the kinds of polarisation we see in the majority of qualitative studies about bisexuality, polyamory and trans. Could it be that eliciting spoken or written data is particularly constraining for participants, giving researchers a limited impression of their experiences or understandings? It was these concerns which led us to explore the possibilities of visual methods in our own research: those methods which go beyond spoken or written language in some way.

### **What are visual methods?**

At the first annual conference on *Visual Psychologies* (Brown & Reavey, 2008), it emerged that visual methods have been used in social science research in three main ways:

1. To conduct analysis of existing visual material,
2. To produce data, and
3. To disseminate research.

In the first of these, extant visual materials are the focus of analysis. Photographs, web pages, or other visual material form the dataset, and are interpreted in order to answer the research questions. Examples in the study of sexualities include Barker's (2007) analysis of images of LGB people in psychology textbooks, or Tyler's (in prep) analysis of sex-worker adverts in gay men's magazines.

The second way of using visual methods is as a means of data elicitation, in which participants are invited to produce visual images. Examples of such work include del Busso and Reavey's (in press) use

of photographs of objects to facilitate narrative interviews with young heterosexual women; or Rooke's (2006) research, where she asked lesbian participants to produce snapshot images of their everyday environments and used these to prompt discussion in interviews (see also Ryan-Flood & Rooke, 2009).

Finally, visual methods have been used to disseminate the findings of research. Janice Haaken's documentary *Queens of Heart* (2006) presents the findings of research into the social psychology of drag, while O'Neill and Campbell's 'Safety Soapbox' exhibition and website (2004, 2008), present images produced as part of a research project into residents' responses to street prostitution.

By far the most common type of visual methods is the former type (e.g. Rose, 2007). However, our interest here is in the second type of visual method: using visual techniques as a means of data elicitation. In such research, participants are encouraged to create some form of visual data to reflect their identity, practices, experiences or understandings. This may take the form of a series of photographs, or a collage, a model made with bricks, modelling clay or other materials, a picture or a comic strip. Participants are then encouraged to describe what they have produced, either to the researcher (in a one-to-one interview situation) or to other participants (in a group discussion). This is used as the starting point for a more general discussion of the topic which is recorded and transcribed in the standard way. The visual materials are photographed at the end of the session (if they are not in photographic format already), and these images are embedded in the final transcript and publications based upon the research.

We are in the process of developing a poststructural, phenomenological method of analysis for this kind of data following Langdrige's (2007) approach, which applies both a hermeneutics of description, and a hermeneutics of suspicion, to data (drawing on Ricoeur, 1970). This allows for both an empathetic engagement with lived experience, and a critical analysis of the way in which accounts of experience are located within power dynamics.

The process of analysis begins during data collection, as participants themselves are invited to discuss their creations, once each has been given a chance to describe what it means to them in detail without interruption. When multiple participants are present, this discussion generally involves drawing out common themes which have emerged during the presentations, and commenting on the diversity and differences between them. Our own analysis then focuses first on using participants' own words to describe their creation and what it means to them in detail; drawing out all of the different understandings and meanings that we heard during the discussion. After this, we bring in more

theoretical approaches to interrogate the data (for example, queer, social constructionist and existentialist theories). For example, while remaining cognisant of participant voices, we then examine how wider societal discourses are reproduced or resisted in the accounts given, and what possible alternative accounts are not told. This is synthesised in the final report in a way which tells a story through the data, foregrounding the lived experience of participants and critiquing the wider context in which certain stories can and cannot be told. There is an emphasis on ensuring that all analysis is accessible to the participants themselves, so that they are able to check the research stories against their own experiences.

The visual data themselves are not analysed by us, despite the many different techniques available to researchers for the analysis of visual materials (See Rose, 2007). This is because it would be highly problematic to impose our interpretations on participants. Phenomenologically speaking, dreams can only be made sense of by the dreamer, who understands the meaning of their various components (Van Deurzen-Smith, 1997). In a similar way, we cannot know the meanings of the various components of a collage or model (its colours, textures and different elements). Therefore we can only analyse the participant's description of it, and its meanings, rather than imposing our own meanings upon it. Researchers taking a more psychoanalytic or semiotic approach may feel that an interpreter could discern underlying meanings in such visual materials that were not consciously understood by the creator, but from a critical phenomenological stance, such readings are not considered appropriate or necessary. From the critical and egalitarian standpoint through which we engage with the research it might, perhaps, be more accurate to say that it is the participants who analyse their work and the researchers who *contextualise* it (within theory, culture etc.).

### **Why use visual methods for studying non-heteronormative sexualities?**

There are several reasons why this use of visual methods as a form of data elicitation is particularly appropriate for the study of non-heterosexual sexualities. The main one, which we are focusing on in this chapter, is the reason alluded to above: the potential of such methods to elicit multiple and diverse data. However, we will briefly touch on a number of other, related, reasons in addition to this.

Plummer's groundbreaking (1995) book *Telling Sexual Stories* offers one potential explanation for the fact that much qualitative research on marginalised identities and practices tends to reproduce very similar participant narratives (whether these are celebrated or criticised by authors). Plummer argues that people make sense of their identities by telling stories about them. In order to do this, they draw on narratives which are already available (in the media and the communities around them), and – in

telling their stories – they add to this pool. Certain sexual stories have their 'time' when a critical mass is reached and they start to be told more publicly: 'coaxed' by researchers, journalists and documentary makers from those who are willing to speak out. Examples which Plummer explores include the coming out story, and the narrative of being a survivor of sexual abuse. The ways in which people draw on existing stories, and add their stories to these (for example, on online communities or in newspaper articles) means that very similar stories end up being told and told again, following a standardised structure and format. This may be particularly the case when certain rights rest on being recognised as a legitimate sexual citizen (see Langdridge, 2006) and when services are required which are viewed as being dependent on telling certain stories, as in the case of eliciting hormones and surgery for trans people, for example (Schrock & Reid, 2006).

We were struck, due to our own involvement in the communities we were studying, how the stories we heard in private conversations and at community events, for example, were far richer and more diverse, than the standard stories which found their way into research publications or media representations in these areas. It was for this reason that we began to explore methodological potentials for eliciting data differently with these groups and finding some way of recording such accounts. We decided upon visual methods for two reasons. First, we were struck that there is generally more acceptance of diversity when people share artwork than when they speak or discuss. In discussions, for example, there is often an implicit aim to reach consensus and to come up with one agreed understanding or explanation (Wilkinson, 1999). This intersects with the Gricean *conversational* maxim of quality which seeks for 'truth' rather than 'a truth' or 'personal truth' (Grice, 1975). In addition, as Plummer has highlighted, dominant narratives may well drive the stories which are told to an interviewer. However, when it comes to artistic objects, there is a dominant cultural understanding that these do not all have to be the same: that vastly diverse pictures, sculptures and so on can be regarded as equally 'true' as representations of the same object or concept. We wondered whether starting with the sharing of such visual materials would enable an acceptance that diverse stories or experiences might be equally acceptable. In his work on identity, visual researcher David Gauntlett (2007) had previously found that modelling methods gave people time to reflect on their experiences and enabled them to present a set of ideas all at once. This allowed them to clearly articulate ideas which were often difficult to express verbally, or appeared contradictory.

Secondly, on a very practical level, we noticed that members of the communities we were interested in were already engaged in these kinds of practices. Community events, such as BiCon, BiFest, Polyday or OpenCon frequently had a 'craft corner' where people went to knit, draw, or make collages. Many of

the workshops involved artistic, bodily, or otherwise creative practices (for example using body paint, making plaster casts of genitalia, or taking photographs). This meant that our participants were already within a 'creative space' where people, who might otherwise not have engaged with creative activities were prepared to do so. This reduced the selection bias compared to advertising for people to engage in creative activity based research. Our research was presented as additional workshops for attendees to participate in if they chose to, but we made clear that we were planning to use the data for research purposes and suggested that people only take part if they were comfortable with this. There was also always an option of taking part but not having their creation used, or striking their material from the recorded discussion which all had the opportunity to check after the event. In this way participants self-recruited from the pool of people attending the event.

Elsewhere we have written about the importance of having our research questions and studies emerge from the communities which we study, rather than being imposed upon them (Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy, & Brewer, 2008). This seems particularly vital when working with sexual communities which have been pathologised and stigmatized in much research, and which are over-researched in some areas and under-researched in others with little consideration of what research will be of value to the communities themselves (Hagger-Johnson, Barker, Richards & Hegarty, forthcoming 2011). Embedding our research in practices which were already happening in the communities we worked with was one way of making sure that it was truly participatory; both in terms of the topics under investigation and the familiarity of participants with the methods used to explore them.

All of this fits, theoretically, within a larger trend in psychology and sociology in the last decade or so. This is the turn from discourse towards experience, emotion, embodiment and materiality. There has been a recognition that social constructionist and discursive approaches have neglected people's 'inner lives' and how they experience themselves within the social context. These are items which discursive approaches are so good at studying (Wetherell, 2003). This has led to the opening up to investigation from an experiential point of view of the realm of feelings, sensations and emotions, for example, the study of the social world from an embodied perspective of people's lived experience of being in their bodies (Finlay & Langdridge, 2007); and recognition of the way in which people experience the world through everyday material objects (clothes, equipment) and through the physical spaces they occupy. We agree with Reavey and Johnson (2008) that visual methods offer possible ways of incorporating such embodied experiences and awareness of socio-spatial contexts. As we will see, the conversations which occur following the creation of visual materials often have very different foci to standard discussions or interviews, and frequently provide more of a sense of the embodied, affective



experience of identities and practices.

We are arguing here, then, that visual methods have the potential to more fully, and accurately, represent both the richness and the diversity of the lived experience of non-heterosexual and trans identities and practices. In addition these methods are more participatory in the sense of cooperatively working with, and building on, expertise already within such communities (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) and break down traditional hierarchical research frameworks (Clarke et al., 2010) (which we also do by involving participants in developing research questions, and commenting on final reports). These theoretical and political aims come together in the notion that essentialising research practices (whether quantitative or qualitative) risk doing violence to participants. When researchers present only one unified understanding of a group or community (even if it is a celebratory one) they constrain and limit their human potential. As Heckert (2011) argues, claiming the authority to speak for another person violates their capacity to speak for themselves and to tell their own stories. 'Practices of telling people who they are and what they want erect a barrier between them and who (or what) they can create themselves to be' (May, 1994, p.131). This is why we feel it is important to be open to the richness and multiplicity of understandings, experiences and meanings both across people within any group, and within the same person. Our hope is that visual methods will enable these to emerge more readily than talk alone, and that participants will be more able to recognise their own voices and visions in our reporting of such research.

### **Our role as facilitators**

Before continuing to present case studies of the use of such visual methods, it is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on our own role in the research because clearly this impacts greatly on the questions we ask, the recruitment of participants, and the analysis and reporting of data. In all cases we have a long history of involvement in the relevant communities, often holding multiple roles of community membership, activism, research and representation, and professional engagement (as trainers and practitioners). This means that we are already known by most potential participants, and - at least to some extent - trusted due to previous experience of how we have worked on behalf of such communities and the kinds of research we have produced. Much has been written about the tensions inherent in negotiating a 'simultaneous insider-outsider perspective' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 112), something that is very commonplace in research on non-heterosexual sexualities as many are engaged due to their own sexual identities and activist roles in these areas (Lambevski, 1999). Clearly all researchers are - to some extent - insiders, in that that they are inevitably more involved with their participant groups than most people. Many may also be members of the communities they are

studying, or at least affiliated to them as allies. At the same time, researchers are all – to some extent – outsiders, due to the nature of studying a group or community and articulating them to others who are not members themselves.

In the research mentioned here our known insider status aided the research in many ways: Access was easy as we were present at events where we conducted the research already (as participants, organisers and/or invited presenters). Many participants had existing knowledge of, and trust in, us, and also communicated that to those new to the event. As mentioned above, we have existing knowledge of the kinds of workshops which fit well within such events and communities, so we were able to shape our research designs accordingly. Follow-up with participants was also a simple matter as we had ongoing involvement with the communities. Being part of networks of academics, writers and researchers within these communities, we were also able to discuss our research with community groups at all stages, from development of questions through to dissemination of findings. This enabled us to be more confident in the utility of the research and the appropriateness and ethics of our analyses.

Insider status also has its inevitable drawbacks, however. This is something that we have written about in greater detail elsewhere (e.g. Ritchie & Barker, 2005) and will continue to do so, as reflexive consideration of our roles and their impact is a vital element of any qualitative research (Etherington, 2004; Finlay & Gough, 2003). To summarise, difficulties include the management of dual roles (when is one a researcher, an activist, a practitioner, a community member?) and the potential loss of our own support from such communities when we have professional roles in relation to them. On the level of the data collection, there is the risk that people will feel pressure to participate due to previous engagement with us. In terms of data analysis, just as there is a danger that people too close to the 'outside' will fail to understand their participants or to communicate the complexity of their experiences adequately, there are risks that those too close to the 'inside' will be drawn to tell politically advantageous stories more than those that are not, or will miss things that are too familiar to notice, or will be tempted to focus on the accounts that are most similar to their own experiences, or the ones they are familiar with. There are also tensions for the researcher around self-disclosure how 'out' to be in relation to their own status (for a detailed consideration of this see Barker, 2006). To summarise, we address such potential problems by:

- Recognition that all research involves negotiation of insider/outsider perspectives and multiple roles, to some extent.
- Emphasising consent strongly to participants and explicitly talking with them about how they can

withdraw without feeling pressure, and how any dual roles will be negotiated.

- Developing our own networks of activists, researchers, academics, writers and practitioners within such communities to ensure ongoing support and mutual advice.
- Constant reflexivity about our possible assumptions and biases, endeavouring to be open to multiple stories in the data, whilst recognising that we have appropriate political awareness about the potential ways in which our research might be read beyond these communities.

On a practical level we tend to take part in the data collection ourselves, and share our own creations and stories during the research. We find this can serve to minimise power differences between researcher and researched, as does inviting participants into the analysis procedure. It also enables us to model the fact that art work does not have to be of a high standard! Again there are inevitable potential drawbacks to this approach (e.g. participants could feel pressured to provide similar creations or stories). This did not seem to be the case, but it is worth being aware of. We would encourage each researcher to find the way of working these methods which fits best for them and for the communities they are working with, which may well be a process of some trial and error.

In the remainder of the paper we will briefly summarise three case studies of such visual methods research which we have conducted, highlighting the ways in which the data elicited in this research differs from, and invites different conclusions to, past qualitative research in these areas.

## **Examples**

### *Bisexual identities*

Past qualitative research on bisexual identities has focused on how bisexual people construct their identities through language. As mentioned previously, this research tends to be polarised into that affirming the queer potentials of bi identities to resist dichotomies of gay and straight, male and female (e.g. Berenson, 2002; Bower, Gurevich & Mathieson, 2002) and that critiquing the limitations of bisexuality, particularly the way bisexual participants still draw on dichotomies of gender ('both' men and women) when discussing their identities and attraction (e.g. Ault, 1999; Bowes-Catton 2007). Our own previous focus group discussion research in this area (Barker et al., 2008) found this same contradiction. Early on, participants unanimously rejected dichotomies of sexuality, dismissing gender as 'irrelevant' to their attraction, but later they would discuss, for example, being more or less attracted to women or men at certain times, or taking different sexual roles at different times with men and women (see also Barker, Richards & Bowes-Catton, 2009).

Qualitative research on bisexual identities, then, consistently demonstrates that binaries of sexuality and gender are simultaneously rejected and re-inscribed in participant accounts. Ault (1999) argues that this results in 'indistinct and fragmented articulations of identity' (p.174). However, in contradiction to this, bi people vehemently stress the wholeness and coherence of their identities (Bowes-Catton 2007). Therefore, we began by speculating that bi participants struggled to articulate coherent identities, not because they experienced their identities as fragmented, but because linguistic constraints forced them to locate their accounts of identity within the very dichotomous paradigm that they rejected. Hence we wondered whether visual methods may enable different accounts of the experience of bi identity.

One of the current authors, Helen, conducted both individual photo-diary research, and modelling workshops at the community bisexual conference, BiCon 2008, around the embodied experience of being bisexual at BiCon and in everyday life (see Bowes-Catton, Barker & Richards, forthcoming 2011 for further details). What was striking about the data was that there was very little mention of gender at all. Rather participant descriptions focused on the experience of being able to breathe in bisexual spaces (compared to more everyday spaces), and the sense of being 'at home' and knowing that ones' sexuality was 'recognised' such that they did not have to keep reaffirming it as they might in day-to-day life, in order for it to be visible.

Here is an example of one participant's model and self-description:



Um, well I did a two sided collage sculpture and um, I guess this side, um, I picked out a lot of pictures of water and sky and birds and sort of this expanse of feeling which I was just feeling when I was out on the deck (laughs) and just thinking to myself, my God, I have this whole afternoon to be *myself*, and I can just *be* bisexual, and it just felt *so amazing* and I'd never felt that before and it was just like, wow, I didn't know that I could feel this relaxed in my body, and I actually do, because I go around on my bike with my muscles and my body very contracted all the time, and it just felt like these *spaces* opening up within my muscles and just like, air, and opening up the spaces, yeah, it just was an incred-

(outbreath) yhaaaaaaa, it feels *good*, you know. So I wanted to express that.

This sense of bisexual spaces as airy places where people can relax, breathe deeply and 'just *be* bisexual' emerged in many of the individual interviews as well as in the group discussions. Our analysis of this aspect focused on getting across this rich lived experiences of openness, spaciousness and expansion in the participant's own words (hermeneutics of empathy) and then relating this, theoretically, to theories of embodiment (hermeneutics of suspicion). We pointed out that participants seemed to describe overcoming mind-body dualistic splits in bi spaces to experience themselves as body-subjects rather than body-objects (Merleau Ponty, 1945). This also seemed to mean that they felt more connected to the world around them, and less concerned with the perceptions that others may have of them: paradoxically less objectified as being 'bisexual'.

Clearly this kind of account is very different from the gender-focused accounts of identity reported in much previous research, and suggests a sense of some bisexual people – at least when they are in bisexual spaces – moving beyond dualities of sexuality, gender, mind/body, self/world and self/other in ways which feel whole rather than fragmented, and which are grounded in material, spatial and sensory experience.

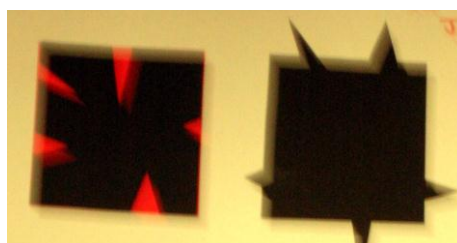
#### *Polyamorous emotions*

The previous example hopefully demonstrates the rich nature of the data obtained using visual methods, as well as the potential for moving beyond some of the linguistic constraints of data collection which is purely verbal. In this next example, and the one following it, we illustrate the potentials of visual methods to elicit diversities of experience.

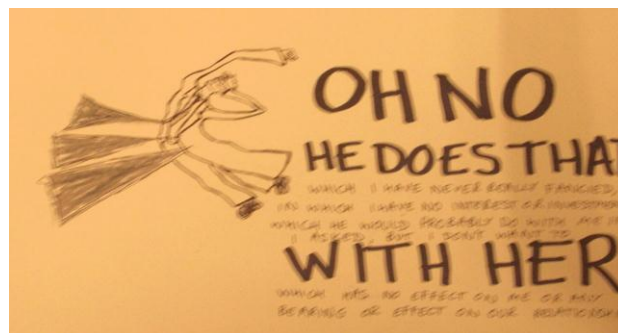
Like research on bisexuality, past qualitative studies on polyamory, and other openly non-monogamous forms of relating, have tended to polarise into that which is celebratory and that which is critical (Barker & Langdrige, 2010). Examples of the former include Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks (2004) and Pallotta-Chiarolli (1995), who argue for the liberatory and queer potentials of non-monogamous and polyamorous relationship styles, and several authors who put them forward as more inherently feminist, or Marxist, ways of managing relationships (see Barker & Ritchie, 2007). Examples of the latter include Finn and Malson's (2008) research finding 'monogamous-styles' of relating prevalent in consensually non-monogamous relationships: regulation of time, energy and resources reinforcing the primacy of the couple; or Jamieson's (2004) research which similarly found normative couple arrangements to be at the heart of openly non-monogamous relationships, and no political motivations for engagement in them.

As previously mentioned, both purely celebratory and purely critical accounts of such burgeoning, and stigmatised, identities and practices are politically extremely problematic. Celebratory accounts, whilst potentially increasing acceptability, can exclude those who are not engaging in polyamory for political reasons, and also set up an idealised version of polyamory which can be hard to live up to. Critical accounts, on the other hand, risk further stigmatising and demonising identities and practices which already occupy a precarious position and have not reached any point of recognition or rights. Jamieson's research is a prime example of such a problematic study. It is presented as a study on non-monogamy, despite only interviewing people in one kind of non-monogamous arrangement (couples who were openly non-monogamous – no single people, triads, or polyamorous families, which are equally common, Barker & Langdridge, 2010). The conclusion that openly non-monogamous people tended to be apolitical is drawn from a very small amount of research (four pilot interviews) and the researcher displays a lack of self-focused reflexivity in her construction of non-monogamy as a 'leisure pursuit' (p.53) and assumption that couples would stop being non-monogamous when they had children (again, not born out by larger scale studies, see Barker & Langdridge, 2010). Reflexivity is the starting point of visual methods research following the process we are advocating here, including a willingness to turn the hermeneutic of suspicion used (queer theory, feminism, etc.) on oneself and ones' practices as a researcher.

One of the current authors, Meg, decided to employ visual methods to study an aspect of polyamorous experience which had previously only been researched using linguistic data: jealousy and related emotions. Again, jealousy tends to be employed by polyamory researchers in ways which demonstrate the liberating (celebratory) or normative (critical) potentials of this relationship form. Either, polyamory is hailed as a way of escaping, deconstructing or reframing, conventional possessive functions of jealousy, and creating innovative and liberating alternatives such as compersion (feeling positive when seeing one's partner with another partner) (e.g. Ritchie & Barker, 2006). Or, in the more critical research, emphasis is placed on the problematic and artificial hierarchies and barriers which are put in place to protect non-monogamous people from jealousy (e.g. hierarchies between love and sex, barriers around the couple relationship, see Finn & Malson, 2008). Each type of research risks assuming a unitary understanding of jealousy which is shared by participants. However, the current research found that visual depictions of jealousy were widely diverse. Consider the two example collages produced below:



And, this one's jealousy (left half of the picture). Kind of, um, incomplete with parts missing. And the jealousy comes from other people, um, and seeing that, not only are they complete and whole but they've also got everything I want as well...



And I had to put the bit. It just felt *really* goth and kindof like 'Oh no' (high pitched) 'you're doing this thing which I have absolutely no interest in doing, which I've never done which has nothing to do with me but with *somebody else* (high pitched)' Um so. It's, it's deliberately a bit over the top because I feel very over the top sometimes. And that's also how I calm down afterwards.

So we have one experience of jealousy within polyamory which is about a despondent sense of personal lack and incompleteness, in comparison to others, and another which is highly energised and melodramatic: with quite a different set of sensations and emotional tone attached to it. There were certainly some resonances through the data and shared experiences, for example many images included some sense of spikeyness, tightness, feeling small, and being turned inwards, reflecting the embodied experience of their creators. However, even these did not apply to everyone, and jealousy was also experienced, for example, as falling into an abyss, feeling terrified of loss, desperate hunger, feeling stretched thin, self-righteous rage which was almost enjoyable, a tangled confusion, and a sense of discomfort within one's own skin.

### *Trans sexuality*

In the area of trans there has also been a marked tendency in past qualitative research, for writers to co-opt trans experience for their own ends. Queer theory for many years used trans experience to demonstrate gender fluidity and as an example of PoMo (postmodern) sexuality (see Halberstam, 2005; Queen, & Schimel, 1997). However, many trans people's experiences do not fit within these radical

celebratory discourses as they see themselves very much as a man or a woman operating within the gender dichotomy. In recent years there has been an increase in qualitative research aiming to demonstrate the heteronormativity of trans narratives. This research argues that trans people are stuck within dichotomous, and often stereotypical, understandings of gender and sexuality. Again, such studies fail to capture the diversity of experiences under the broad umbrella of trans (often focusing on particular groups of trans people) and are also very restricted to the specific context in which the data is collected. For example, people recollect and report their experiences quite differently in the context of a research interview (e.g. Johnson, 2007) or a clinical assessment (Speer & Green, 2007) than they do in a community or activist group, with their partner, or on their personal blog.

In her current research, one of the authors, Christina, is employing visual methods to explore the lived experience of sexuality of trans people. This is a topic which has been under-researched in the past, except for pathologising research which has tended to label trans people as either hypersexual or asexual. The findings of the current research suggest a diversity of trans experience which transcend queer/heteronormative and hyper/hypo-sexual dichotomies. Two of the models and participant descriptions are included below:



This purple chappie in the middle is meant to be quite amorphous but sort of happy and I've chosen purple because it's not too strictly tied to gender. So while my gender's pretty fixed, my sexuality doesn't have to be tied to that. This chain, or string, or multicoloured thing ... is meant to represent all sorts of different things: different places, different times, different people, different events.





So I started with the sea, and that's meant to represent how sexuality is always ebbing and flowing like the tide. There is a kind of heterosexual couple copulating in the breakers, like in that movie...I relate more to the female participant. And this flickering flame of wild passion has a little more of a feminine feel sometimes, but is quite non-specific, maybe sometimes masculine also. And then this D/s scene. The dominance is what I relate to and is all a bit more masculine I think. The hands represent different relationships I have which might flow in and out of being sexual.

Here, in contrast to research which locates trans sexuality as being a *result* of the trans person's gender identification (e.g. Blanchard, 2005), we see themes of both fixity and fluidity, gendered and gender-transgressing experience, heteronormative and queer sexuality, all present in the accounts of both participants. The first participant locates her gender as fixed, but her sexuality is not tied to gender (as in heteronormativity), and her sexual practices relate to multiple times, places, people and events. The second draws on dichotomies of gender to recount their different sexual moments, but overall there is a tidal motion to them, a sense of flow, and also the capacity for non-sexual relationships or periods without becoming fixed as asexual.

It is clear from the wider analysis of this data that diversity was the rule in both the way participants experienced and embodied their gender and sexuality, and the narratives they drew on. Participants described sexual practices which they experienced as reinscribing, resisting and transcending heteronormativity, demonstrating again the problem with any either/or polarisation of participant accounts of their identities and practices.

## Conclusions

Hopefully this chapter has shown the potential of visual methods to get beyond the repetition of standard scripts and dominant discourses of sexuality to the diversity and richness of participant's lived experiences. Clearly this is important for political, as well as academic, reasons. The tendency to categorise and come up with unitary explanations for non-heteronormative sexualities is frequently

pathologising and stigmatising, and certainly limits human potential. As we have seen, even celebratory research which sees a whole community as having the same experience, and/or the same meanings and motivations behind their practices, is in danger of constraining the potentials of that group. Whilst it is undoubtedly valuable for research to articulate what people share (for example, shared experiences of biphobia or transphobia, or shared experience of multiple love relationships amongst polyamorous people), it is at least equally important to express what is different and diverse, both across and within groups. This may appear to be an extremely simplistic point, but it still seems absent in much qualitative research which implicitly privileges similarity over diversity in its representations.

Of course visual methods have their limitations as well. As with all methods, they allow and enable some stories, and constrain and exclude other possibilities. Just as linguistic data is constrained by the words available to participants, so visual methods have constraints according to the materials used. There are problems, for example, in the use of catalogues and magazines for collage-making. Whilst many participants liked to use images of people to represent their relationships and identities, clearly images in such texts are limited to societally 'attractive', non-disabled, and cisgendered people. Similarly, materials such as building bricks or glitter may be experienced in gendered ways by participants. We have found that some prefer the openness of mediums such as modelling clay, whilst others find they like something more concrete, such as toy figures or magazine pictures to stimulate their creativity. There is also frequently a fear of not being artistic enough, which is why we tend to choose more playful forms of creativity.

It is striking that, despite the aim to get 'beyond language' in some way, the data which is analysed in visual methods research still tends to be conversations about the creative productions rather than the productions themselves. As mentioned, we avoid analysing the visual materials themselves because it would be problematic to impose our interpretations on participants. Similarly we discourage interpretation of other people's materials in the sessions. However, we do draw participants' own analysis in our reports, and present their images. All this means that we are left with verbal data reported in verbal ways. We are continuing to explore further possibilities for visual dissemination (going back to the techniques explored by the likes of Haaken & Kohn, 2006, and O'Neill, 2008, earlier in the chapter). This could also serve the political aim of disseminating the research to a wider audience, for example via YouTube, illustrated blogs, or web comics.

Additionally there is the limitation that creations elicited in the kinds of groups mentioned here are often collected without the context of fuller accounts of participant life-stories. It is for this reason that

we have also, in some cases, conducted research using visual methods as part of more detailed narrative accounts, often in one-to-one interview settings (Bowes-Catton, Barker, & Richards, forthcoming, 2011). In an ideal world the group workshop 'snapshot' would be combined with more detailed one-to-one engagement over time (more than one interview) to get at both diversity of understandings and experiences, and rich, detailed accounts. For example, one of us, Helen, has employed the technique of getting participants to take photographs of their everyday lives and their lives when attending a community event, and has used these as the basis of detailed interviews about their life-stories and their daily experience of bisexuality.

Finally, as with so much other qualitative and quantitative research on these sexual identities, our research is limited – thus far – in that it only gets at those who take part in such community events, and the subset of those who are interested in creative workshops. We have, to some extent, dealt with the latter problem by developing a range of workshops employing different kinds of creativity. Some people reported that they felt more 'verbal' or 'technological' than 'artistic' so we have experimented with the writing of memories (see Landridge, Barker, Stenner & Reavey, forthcoming 2011) and more recently the creation of online comics. Some of us are also employing such methods in other spaces, such as healthcare and therapeutic settings, which will capture different groups of participants (although with different limitations given that most who attend such settings are struggling in some way, whereas those who attend community events are not necessarily foregrounding the difficulties of their identities in such a way). Community events, in these areas, do tend to be particularly limited in their race and class diversity though (see Barker, et al. 2008), so this is a very important area to address. Generally speaking, the best advice would be to employ various means of participant recruitment, and various forms of creative data elicitation, but obviously this needs to be balanced with practical and time constraints.

Packard (2008) points out that there is nothing inherently empowering about visual methods. However they do seem to have the potential to enable participants, especially those communities who are often marginalized or silenced, to gain a voice in research to a greater extent than more conventional methods do (O'Neill, 2008). For example, in the way in which participants can actually show their experiences and their lived spaces to researchers, rather than simply describing them (Reavey, 2008) and have these depictions included in the reports of the data.

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## Biographies

Meg Barker is a senior lecturer in psychology at the Open University specialising in counselling and psychotherapy. Meg co-edits the journal *Psychology & Sexuality*, and has produced two edited

collections with her co-editor Darren Langdridge on sadomasochism and non-monogamous relationships. Meg's research involves working within communities drawing on their own discussions and workshops, and employs visual methods in this context to explore experiences of relationships and sexual practices. Meg is also a practising therapist and co-organises Critical Sexology, the College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists conferences, and BiReCon. Email: [m.j.barker@open.ac.uk](mailto:m.j.barker@open.ac.uk).

Christina Richards is the Senior Specialist Psychology Associate at the West London Mental Health NHS Trust (Charing Cross) National Gender Identity Clinic and is a member of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health. She is also works broadly in critical mental health and is currently undertaking her doctorate in Counselling Psychology specialising in gender and sexualities, and using visual methods to explore trans people's embodied experiences of their sexuality. She publishes and lectures on critical mental health, gender and sexualities, is the first author of an upcoming book on gender and sexuality for psychologists and therapists (Richards, Barker & Lenihan, forthcoming 2012), and is the co-organiser of the biennial BiReCon event. Email: [web@christinarichards.co.uk](mailto:web@christinarichards.co.uk).

Helen Bowes-Catton is a PhD student and Associate Lecturer at the Open University. Her research uses creative and visual methods to examine the ways in which bisexual identities are experienced and produced in bisexual spaces and in the spaces of everyday life. Email: [h.bowes-catton@open.ac.uk](mailto:h.bowes-catton@open.ac.uk)